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ABSTRACT

This study examines strengths and weaknesses of Mexican public education as perceived by educators within the system. Forty teachers and administrators from various levels in the public school system were interviewed in 1988. Interviewees were primarily located in southern Mexican cities. Mexico's public educational structure is highly centralized. In elementary and secondary schools, the same curricula is used throughout the country. Higher education, indigenous, and adult education systems are described. Separate questionnaires were developed for administrators and classroom teachers. At all levels, respondents indicated that they worked with children from middle to lower-class backgrounds, and educators reported problems related to economic factors. They perceived that the cost of school materials, for example, posed burdens on Mexican families. A common complaint was that private schools were able to offer a better education than public schools. The results also suggested program strengths, including perceived community support at the elementary levels and an apparent increase in educational opportunities for low-income students. Quality of materials was judged to be adequate, although many educators would like to have access to a greater variety of materials. Other questions touched upon job satisfaction, teacher inservice training, and adult and indigenous education programs. Overall strengths include perceived social progress and an effort to reach more people through different teaching approaches, whereas problems included apathy, lack of funding, and structural inflexibility. This document includes English translations of the questionnaires. (TES)

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INSIDERS' PERSPECTIVES ON STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE MEXICAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

SUSAN RIPPBERGER

AUGUST, 1988

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

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INTRODUCTION

The main purpose of this study was to identify strengths and weaknesses of Mexican public education as preceived by educators within the system. The author felt that those directly involved would be the most thoroughly informed. While this sample is not aimed at providing grounds for broad generalizations, limited conclusions may be offered.

Forty teachers and administrators from various levels in the public school system were interviewed in 1988 to discover their ideas about the strengths and weaknesses of the Mexican educational system.

The educators were from the cities of Cuautla, Cuernavaca, Tepalcingo, Tlaltizapan and Yautepec (state of Morelos, Teloloapan (state of Guerrero), Oaxaca (capital of the state of Oaxaca), Tenancingo (state of Mexico) and Mexico City, the nation's capital. (See maps, Appendix A)

BACKGROUND: MEXICO'S EDUCATION

The following outline of the structure of Mexican education provides a general background for the study.

Mexico's public educational structure is highly centralized. For the first eight grades, the same curriculum per grade is used throughout the republic.

The formal system of education, under the direction of the National Secretary of Public Education (SEP), has five levels: preschool, primary, secondary, preparatory and university. (Formal education is defined here as a highly structured program and curriculum, divided into grades and levels, requiring regular school attendance, periodic examinations and the awarding of formal evaluations and degrees).

Preschool (for five year-olds) is usually held at a separate location from primary schools. Children are taught social skills and readiness in reading and math. The curriculum focus is moving from organized play to an increasing academic program.

Although kindergarten in non-obligatory, many parents have chosen to enroll their five year-olds in a preschool program. Between 1980 and 1984 preschool attendance almost doubled. The number is expected to grow from approximately one million to four million by the year 2000 (Pescador, 1985 and Europa, 1987).

The constitution guarantees children (age six through fourteen) eight years of free and compulsory education. On the elememtary levels (kindergarten through six grade) one free textbook per student per subject area is provided by the government each year.

At all levels, uniforms, pencils, paper, and

other school supplies are the responsibility of each student's family. The traditional requirement of uniforms for primary and secondary schooling is currently being debated in the Ministry of Education.

Following their eighth year of schooling, students who continue may choose one of two three-year programs, college prepreparatory or terminal. In terminal school, students are trained to work as middle-level technicians. It is called "terminal" because studies are considered complete, and graduates are given a title, fully prepared to enter the job market.

Those who desire and are able may continue with higher education at a university or normal school.

Since 1984 the federal government has upgraded teacher licensing requirements to include a bachelor's degree and university pedagogical training. Previously two-year secondary normal training was sufficient for teaching in the lower grades.

In 1981, the National Institute for Adult Education (INEA) was established to offer an alternative to those adults who missed the benefits of formal schooling. The INEA's main function is to organize and develop literacy and basic education for adults (aged 15 and older).

Adult education programs provide a different environment for learning. The setting and approach are less regulated than in the formal educational system. While there are exams given and certificates awarded, regular attendance is not required and class locations are flexible.

Adults are reached through classes offered in small villages and by television and radio programs. There is a ratio of one literacy worker for every ten adults. Classes of interest, like baking, auto mechanics and sewing, are offered to the local people as follow-up and reinforcement to initial literacy training. High-interest reading materials have been developed in 14 different indigenous languages as texts for these classes.

Under the administration of President Lazaro Cardenas (1934 - 1940) the National Indigenist Institute was created. In this program, students from rural Indian villages attend normal school for teacher-training, then return to their own village to teach in the native language.

Indigenous Education, under the direction of the SEP, involves bilingual instruction for grades kindergarten through six. Students are taught in their own language while given structured instruction in their second language (Spanish) until they are able to understand lessons given in Spanish only.

FUNDS FOR EDUCATION

In the public schools, parents pay no other costs than uniforms and school supplies. In private schools, in addition to uniforms and school supplies, tuition fees are paid by the family.

The federal government emphasizes public education as a means to elevate the standard of living, increase the number who can actively participate in democratic life and develop the nation's resources (SEP, Programas y Metas, 1979). It pays 70% of the cost of public education. The remaining 30% is met by the state government and private industry (Europa, 1987).

Government spending on public education may indicate national priorities. Of the federal government's total expenditures for 1983, approximately six percent was spent on education (Europa, 1987).

Figures for 1983 indicate that education was the fourth largest expenditure. The Mexican government spent eight times more on public education than on national defense. The only larger expenditures were (1) finance and public credit (10% of the total), (2) Public debt (28% of the total) and (3) Additional expenditure of decentralized bodies and federal government enterprises (34% of the total) (Europa, 1987).

METHODOLOGY FOR THE PRESENT STUDY

The effort to collect opinions systematically from a sample of Mexican educators, involved the development of two questionnaires, one for administrators, the other for classroom teachers. (See Appendix B, Questionnaires)

Both questionnaires began with several open-ended questions allowing the educators to respond without limiting them to any topic. The remaining questions focused on students, materials, and teacher-training programs. To maintain uniformity, the same questions were asked of each participant.

The questionnaire for administrators had a broader focus, dealing with general school issues. The teachers' questionnaire focused specifically on classrooms, students, and other direct concerns.

Two formats were used to present the questions. Forty percent of the participants were asked the questions directly from the questionnaire in a one-to-one interview setting. Sixty percent were interviewed in a group setting.

As they were interviewed, the educators were urged to be candid, assured that their names would be held confidential. It was explained that the primary purpose was to learn more about the Mexican educational system from those directly involved, and that the study was to be descriptive and analytical rather than

judgmental. All interviewees were offered a copy of the study when it was completed.

A letter of introduction was sent to public educational institutions in Mexico one month prior to the interview. (See Appendix C, Letters of Introduction) The letter stated the nature and purpose for requesting interviews with school personnel. After the writer arrived in Mexico, she made follow-up phone calls and delivered a revised letter of introduction to several other educational institutions.

RESULTS: TEACHER/ADMINISTRATOR BACKGROUNDS

Mexican educators were interviewed during the months of July and August, 1988. Of the total, 24 were teachers and seven administrators. Five had a combination of administration and teaching responsibilities, one was a university level professor/ advisor, two were library/study assistants, and one was a student. Three of the administrators headed educational programs on the state level.

Seven of the 40 were involved in elementary education, 13 in secondary, eight in terminal, two in preparatory, two in teacher preparation and eight in adult education.

The years of experience for teachers ranged from one to 30, with a mean of eight years. Overall, administrators had spent less time in their job. Their experience ranged from one to eight years, with a mean of four years. However, most administrators (71%) had been involved in teaching or some other educational position previous to their becoming administrators.

The group interview was made up of experienced professionals working on advanced teaching credentials which would enable them to work in higher levels of education. All were currently working as teachers or administrators.

Rather than asking each question to each member of the group, participants were invited to discuss their views of the Mexican system of education. Many of the questions from the two questionnaires were presented orally. Answers followed in the form of a lively discussion focusing on the strengths and weaknesses of the Mexican system of education. The group interview tended to be quite philosophical in nature. These educators were more reflective and self-critical than those who were given individual interviews.

RESULTS: STUDENTS' BACKGROUNDS

At all educational levels, the teachers and administrators indicated that they worked with children from middle to lower class backgrounds in urban and semi-rural settings. While their students' parents'

occupations varied from semi-professional to unskilled, approximately one-third of those interviewed categorized their students' parents as peasants, or from the lowest socio-economic positions.

Educators indicated that the cost of school materials and uniforms was a burden on the family and that many students (including primary) held jobs to help with finances. Parental support for education varied, but for the most part, few parents helped with their children's homework.

Almost all interviewees (36) stated that their students spoke Spanish fluently. Very few believed that their students spoke any other language. However, most (approximately 75%) of those interviewed said that many students had grandparents who spoke an indigenous language.

RESULTS: PROGRAM STRENGTHS

Educators were asked to relate features which made their schools effective. For the kindergarten and elementary levels, responses included community support and the principal's support of teachers and students in working out problems.

An effective area for the secondary level was the preparation students receive to make a living and help develop the nation's resources. Many graduates, especially from terminal schools, are able to find work immediately. Teachers interviewed at these technical schools considered each other to be well-trained, cooperative and supportive.

Many educators believe that the educational system has evolved over the years by adapting to the changing needs of the nation. Teachers reported an increase in educational opportunities with more poor attending school, improving their lot. Newer avenues for education have been through radio, television, adult education and Indigenous education.

RESULTS: PROGRAM WEAKNESSES

Many of the problems schools face focus on the economy. On all educational levels, the most often recounted problem was a tight budget, accompanied by the related problems of lack of materials, equipment, labs and transportation.

Lack of current research on Mexican education was also cited as a weakness. Other problems common to all levels were irregular attendance, poor nutrition, and family problems.

A common complaint was that private schools were able to offer a better education than public schools. Private schools are able to attract highly qualified teachers and purchase more and better materials and

equipment. Because of these characteristics, private institutions have greater prestige than their free public counterparts.

Several complaints focused on governmental and administrative favoritism in granting funds and awarding positions, and in using public funds for political purposes or pet projects.

Many felt that the Mexican system of education is excellent in theory (comprehensive, flexible, and valuing high standards) but inadequate in practice. Even though it was designed to be flexible and adaptable to community needs, it had grown to be unyielding, inappropriate and burdensome.

Some educators felt that cultural, social and economic inequalities were maintained and perpetuated by the educational system in which elites gain most from the system in terms of power, status and opportunity. Teachers were concerned that the educational system created passive students through its methods of dictation and memorization, rewarding quietness and docility. Educators felt that it would be better to encourage creativity, free thinking and reflection on life and learning. They wanted to see more emphasis placed on active and participatory learning, and less on memorization, order and discipline.

Some in the group felt that passivity and order were a planned effect; that the government would benefit from ignorance and submissive attitudes among lower social class students, who receive the least opportunities and rewards from formal education. They felt one outcome of this system is the creation of a large pool of cheap labor made up of the undereducated.

They hoped that teachers who unconsciously help to maintain the status quo would be more alert and active in raising students' consciousness as an aid in eliminating social inequities.

RESULTS: QUALITY OF MATERIALS

The quality of materials offered by the SEP was believed to be adequate; however, teachers would prefer to have more variety. While the content of the books is usually appropriate for the students' reading ability, the interest level was occasionally seen as low, and the materials used to make the books were not very durable.

Since most students were regarded as fluent in Spanish, Spanish materials are considered adequate.

The content of the state textbooks is considered suitable for urban areas, but not for all rural areas. For example, pictures and stories which include stop lights and apartment buildings are often foreign to students living in rural villages.

Most teachers adapt the state texts for use in

their classrooms. They frequently use their own time and money to develop classroom materials to supplement the state text. School libraries, where they existed, were meagerly stocked.

RESULTS: TEACHER SATISFACTION

In an effort to understand how satisfied educators are with the educational system, they were asked questions regarding their own job satisfaction and future aspirations. Most were found to be happy with their jobs, but hoped to move ahead to teaching at a higher level or into administration. Future career growth required further education at the university level. Many felt that more educational facilities were needed for teacher education.

RESULTS: TEACHER INSERVICE TRAINING

The SEP provides regular workshops with pay for teachers at their school site. Inservice training is offered eight to ten days during the school year, plus an additional one to two weeks during summer vacation. Inservice topics include educational psychology, pedigogy, creating inexpensive teacher-made materials, and other topics requested by teachers or administrators.

Administrators seemed to be satisfied with the inservice program, but teachers were less enthusiastic. They reported that at times inservices were cancelled for lack of interest or participation.

RESULTS: ADULT AND INDIGENOUS EDUCATION

Adult education and indigenous education are analyzed separately because of the differences in their functions and delivery methods.

The most significant strength of adult education is in raising the nation's literacy rate. According to the Secretary of Public Education, in 1979 there were approximately six million illiterate adults, thirteen million literate adults who had not finished primary school, and one million indigenous people who did not speak Spanish (SEP, Programas y Metas, 1979).

Official estimates indicate that the average rate of adult illiteracy had declined from approximately 17 percent in 1980 to about ten percent in 1985 (Europa, 1987). According to an August, 1988 newspaper article, illiteracy had been reduced to 3.6 percent in the state of Tamaulipas, (El Universal, 1988). This figure was confirmed for the state of Morelos by an administrator for adult education.

The success of the adult education programs is based on several unique characteristics. First, it is a multilingual program, with materials in 14 of the most

commonly used indigenous languages. Second, its program is developed on community interests, abilities and needs, rather than having these needs and interests dictated to them from a federal level. Third, cultural centers are established in many rural communities (59 in the state of Morelos). These centers are designed to be informal meeting places, making education a focal point of the community. Fourth, materials are continually evolving to better meet the students' needs. Finally, class schedules are flexible and convenient for the adult student's work and family obligations.

A special form of adult education, under the direction of the SEP, is a program to educate and train indigenous women. An important element of this community-based program is its far-reaching effects. First, women are given a basic education and often elementary vocational training. Second, once the woman of the family is educated, her family benefits in many ways. The woman is better able to care for her family, to help educate them and to encourage in them a desire for learning.

Adult education programs are sometimes less than effective because of a limited budget. Central offices need more modern office equipment and educational materials. Administrators would like increased funds for research and development. Finally a lack of interest on the part of many illiterate adults was seen as a weakness.

RESULTS: INDIGENOUS EDUCATION

In the state of Morelos, there were 138 pre-school and 370 primary children enrolled in the Nahuatl/Spanish bilingual education program. Most were from peasant backgrounds.

The main strength cited was the schools' dedication to preserving the language, culture and customs of indigenous Mexicans. The program reaches out to those previously neglected in an effort to establish and maintain pride in the country's indigenous heritage.

Weaknesses of the indigenous education program included the inability to reach all children in need of indigenous education. Some children are needed at home, while others refuse to attend.

Teacher training was not always sufficient because local indigenous community members were trained only in a secondary normal school. While their understanding of the native language and culture was exemplary, they lacked the comprehensive training given at the university level.

CONCLUSIONS

This pilot survey conducted in Mexico by means of personal interviews was to provide insight into Mexican educators' perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses within their educational system. Strengths mentioned by respondents include social progress and an effort to reach more people through different teaching approaches such as indigenous education and adult education.

Problem areas which still need to be resolved were listed as apathy, lack of money, and structural inflexibility.

Those who worked in formal education settings were more critical of their program. They indicated a desire for change in meeting all students' educational needs. The system in which they work is firmly established, often rigid in function and heavy in bureaucracy. They felt there was little room for creativity and that change was very slow.

Those who worked in less formal eduational systems mentioned more strengths and showed greater enthusiasm for their programs. They said they were able to use new ideas in solving old problems. The greater flexibility provided an opportunity for creativity and autonomy. Perhaps adapting the more successful informal methods into the mainstream of public education might be helpful.

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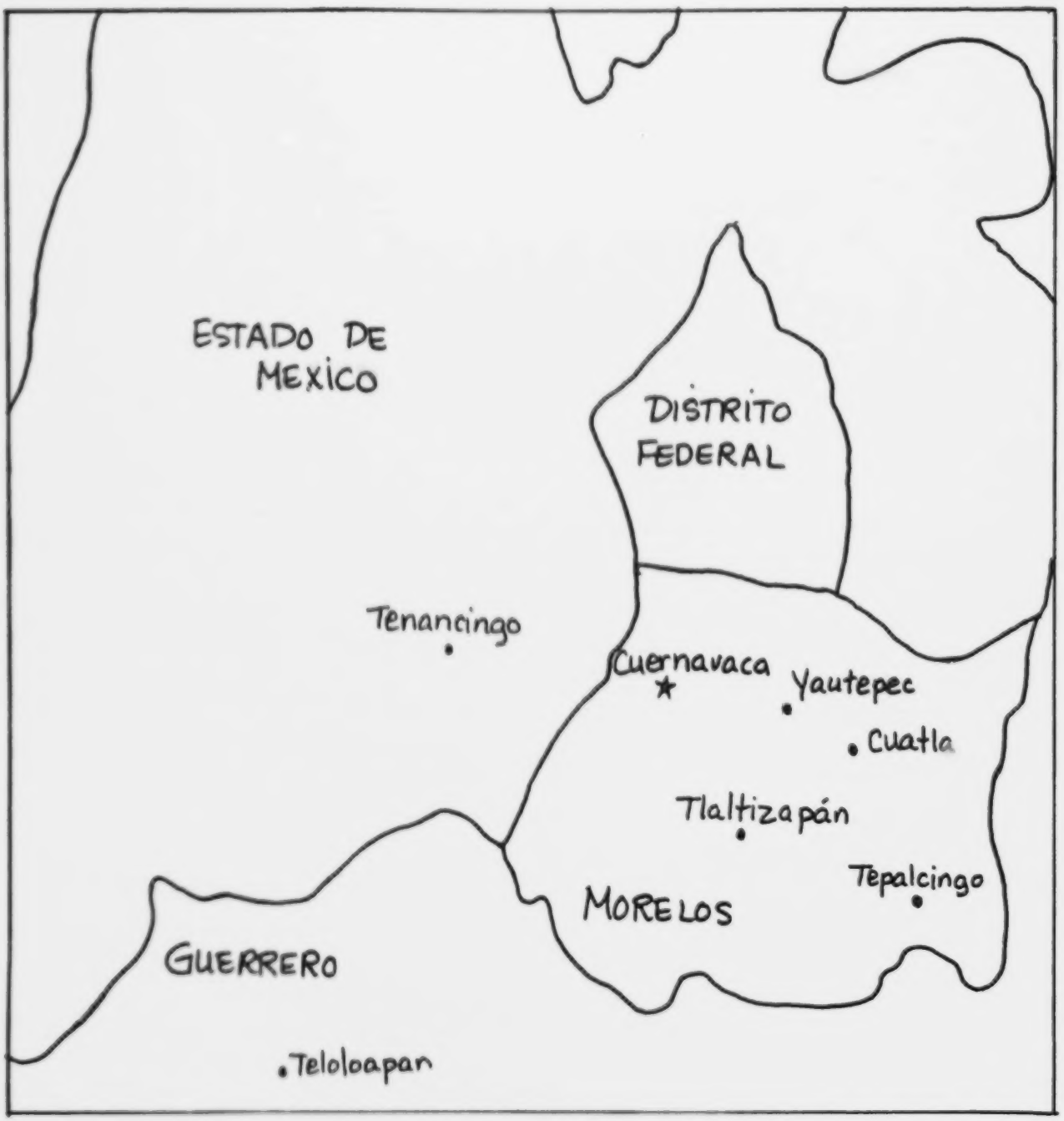
APPENDIX A: MAPS

United States
Pacific Ocean
MEXICO
Gulf of México
State of Mexico
Mexico D.F.
Morelos
Guerrero
Oaxaca
Oaxaca
Central America
N
200
400
600
Kilometers

SOUTH CENTRAL MEXICO -
Cities of Interviewees



APPENDIX B: QUESTIONNAIRES

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SANTA BARBARA • SANTA CRUZ

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

SANTA BARBARA, CALIFORNIA 93106

GENERAL QUESTIONS - PREGUNTAS GENERALES

1. Name - Nombre:

2. Current position - puesto acutal:

3. Years at this job - años en este puesto:

4. Previous work - trabajo anterior:

5. School address (nearest cross streets, or larger town)
   (For mailing final report, if they would like a copy.)
   Dirección (para mandar por correo una copia del documento final si quisiera):

QUESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

1. What grade do you teach?

2. How many students are in your class?

3. How would you describe your students' social and economic background?

   a) Language spoken at home?

   b) Do the parents help with the homework?

   c) Can the family afford school uniforms and materials?

   d) Can the family afford to have their children not work?

   e) What is the occupation of the parents?

4. What makes this school effective?

5. What are some of the problems this school faces?

6. What are some of the subjects or educational activities your students do best? enjoy most?

7. What are the subjects or activities your children have difficulties with?

8. What languages, other than Spanish, do your students speak?

   a) Does not knowing Spanish interfere with learning?

9. How well do the bilingual students do in school?

10. What materials do you use in the classroom?

   a) Are there enough books, paper, desks, etc.?

   b) What is the quality?

   c) Are the materials appropriate for the students' level and language?

11. What could make your students learn more?

12. Are you satisfied with your job? Do you expect to be teaching at this level in 5 or 10 years?

    a) Would you like to move ahead? into administration?

    b) What goals do you have for progressing in your profession?

    c) What type of training would you like to have to progress?

    d) Who would provide the training?

13. Are there any governmental programs available to you which keep you up to date on the latest teaching technology and methods?

QUESTIONS FOR PRINCIPALS

1. Would you describe the structure of your school? (Size, # of classes, # of teachers, # of bilingual teachers)

2. How would you describe the background of the students? (social, economic, educational)

3. What are the strengths of your school?

   a) Are you satisfied with the books - type and amount?

   b) Are you satisfied with the materials - types and amount?

   c) Are materials appropriate to the students' level and language?

d) Are you satisfied with the building and equipment?

e) Are you satisfied with the centralization of education?

f) Are you satisfied with the teacher:child ratio?

g) Are you satisfied with the government's policy on teaching Spanish to the indigenous population?

4. What are the strengths of the Mexican system of Education?

5. What are the problems of the Mexican system of education?

6. Is there anything in your school that could be changed to improve instruction?

7. Do you have any long range goals for your school that you would like to achieve in the next 5 years, 10 years?

8. What types of teacher training programs (either preservice - normal school or in professional inservicing - provided for current teachers) would help achieve your goals?

9. Do you see any ways to increase attendance?

10. What are some ways students may attain higher levels of education?

APPENDIX C: LETTERS OF INTRODUCTION

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA BARBARA

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DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION SANTA BARBARA, CALIFORNIA 93106

agosto, 1988

Estimado Señor o Señora,

Tengo el gusto de presentarme a Ud. Me llamo Susan Rippberger, y pertenesco a la Universidad de California en Santa Bárbara. Actualmente estoy haciendo investigaciones educacionales bajo la facultad de Education International. Puedo contar con 12 años de experiencia como maestra bilingüe en las escuelas primarias. Me gustaría conversar con Ud. respecto al sistema educativo de México.

Estoy compilando información sobre los éxitos y las areas problemáticas del sistema educativo Mexicano desde el punto de vista de los educadores. Pero antes de publicar el documento final, quisiera verificar con Uds., como pedagógos profesionales y experimentados, si la información está precisa.

Estaré dispuesta a envirles una copia del documento final en español o en inglés. Es posible que Ud. tenga interés en los puntos de vista de otros educadores sobre el sistema educativo.

Estaré en Cuernavaca de visita con familiares durente las meses de julio y agosto del presente. Sería un honor tener una untrevista con Ud. y con algunos maestros sobre sus puntos de vista respecto a la educación.

Me gustaría que Ud. me hable por teléfono para ponernos de acuerdo sobre la posibilidad de una entrevista. Mi número de teléfono en Cuernavaca es 13-05-48.

Muchas gracias por su amable atención. Espero con anticipación la oportunidad de conocerle.

Atentamente,

Susan Rippberger

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DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION SANTA BARBARA, CALIFORNIA 93106

Principal
School
Address

Dear Sir/Madam:

Warm greetings from the United States. My name is Susan Rippberger and I am affiliated with the University of California in Santa Barbara.

Currently I am doing research on the Mexican system of education, collecting information on its strengths and weaknesses, as principals and teachers see them. Before publishing the findings as an article in an educational journal, I would like to verify their accuracy by interviewing you and your teachers.

I would be happy to send you a copy of the completed document either in Spanish or English. You may be interested in the views held by your fellow professional educators.

I will be in Cuernavaca during the months of July and August and will call you in July, hopefully to set up an appointment for an interview.

Thank you very much for your kind attention. I am looking forward to meeting you.

Sincerely,

SJR